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ABSTRACT

This brief presents an overview of effective strategies for developing prosocial attitudes and behaviors in elementary school children. The description of approaches and activities can help educators integrate an antiviolence education program into their schools and classrooms, select a program to implement from many models in use around the country, or develop an original plan. The brief also summarizes some theories about the causes of youth violence and the best ways to prevent it. There is a wide range of effective strategies to help children develop prosocial attitudes and behaviors. The most successful are those that are implemented as part of a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach to nurturing children at home, at school, and in the community. The increasing numbers of evaluations of existing programs offer useful guides for future program evaluations. In addition, some organizations provide schools with technical assistance on antiviolence initiatives. Society needs to strengthen communities by supporting parents' efforts to provide emotionally and economically for their children and to control access to weapons. Elements in society that foster the culture of violence, such as the news and entertainment media, need to consider whether their messages are obviating the benefits of youth violence prevention efforts in the schools. (Contains 21 references.) (SLD)

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Developing Social Competence in Children

Institute for Urban and Minority Education

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Choices Briefs

Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY

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DEVELOPING SOCIAL COMPETENCE IN CHILDREN

Young children face a vast and increasing array of challenges as they attempt to develop prosocial competencies and a conciliatory, nonviolent approach to life. Over the last several decades changes in the way families are organized and function have resulted in less, and possibly lower quality, adult-child closeness. At the same time, children have been bombarded with increasing amounts of ever more graphic and titillating violence in the news and entertainment media. Also, more children than ever before in the U.S. are experiencing violence firsthand in their homes and communities. All these forces affect the temperament of children, and each child expresses a unique set of responses to potentially inflammatory situations.

Mental health and education professionals generally agree that it is essential to begin developing prosocial attitudes and behaviors in children at a very young age because aggression in young children that is not remedied nearly always leads to later acts of delinquency (Yoshikawa, 1995). Thus, they have developed a variety of age-appropriate strategies for teaching children how to respond thoughtfully and nonviolently to both internal and external stimuli. This brief presents an overview of effective strategies for use with children in elementary school, a time in their lives when they develop normative beliefs about aggression (Samples & Aber, 1998). The descriptions of approaches and activities can help educators integrate an antiviolence education into their schools and classrooms, select a program to implement from the many models in use around the country, or develop an original plan. As background, the brief also summarizes some theories about the causes of youth violence and the best ways to prevent it.

Influences on Children's Aggression

Bad conduct (the catchall term used to describe aggressive and antisocial behavior) by children has been increasing in both amount and severity; also, it is beginning at an earlier age than in the past (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). As expected, experts in medicine, psychology, sociology, and education explain the causes and possible remedies for this disturbing phenomenon differently. But, while they may debate the power of their explanations for youth violence, their combined contributions to the body of research and practical experience have done much to help practitioners develop prevention strategies.

Causes of Children's Violent and Aggressive Behavior

Constitutional Factors. Some experts believe that bad conduct is largely inherent. They designate the symptoms a "conduct disorder" to indicate that it is an illness, and assert that children with this disorder can never be free from the impulse to act out, although they can learn to control their behavior if they receive ongoing help (Walker et al., 1995). Medical conditions that may cause a deleterious brain chemistry include physical problems such as defects resulting from prenatal and birth trauma, epilepsy, and mental retardation; and mental problems, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression (Flannery, 1997). Some researchers think that external stimuli, such as love and nurturing, can affect brain chemistry to the extent that seemingly innate negative personality characteristics can be reversed (Embry & Flannery, 1999). Most experts, moreover, agree that increasing the social connections and personal status of aggressive children, providing rewards for their good behavior, and reducing threats and adverse stimuli, can significantly alter the behavior patterns of the children.

Psychodynamic Factors. Historically, most psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and educators have recognized that child-rearing experiences, particularly in the early years, also affect the capacity of children to regulate their aggressive impulses. Some youth are raised by parents with severe personality problems, which hinder or distort the psychological structures that the children develop to adapt to their environment. Most mental health professionals believe that the resulting developmental damage is reversible. Effective techniques include individual and family therapy or counseling, family interventions, the provision of alternative adults as mentors, community youth programs, and community education for better child rearing. Schooling that recognizes the specific problems of these youth and supports educational and counseling programs and trains teachers to help them is also an important mediating tool (E. Flaxman, personal communication, June 1999).

Social Factors. Social factors in a child's life can also result in the symptoms of a conduct disorder. These factors include a violent or inadequate family life, parents who are criminals, a deprived and violent neighborhood, a violent and ineffective school, or substantial exposure to real or media violence (Flannery, 1997; Hawkins, Farrington, & Catalano, 1998). Moreover, the specific antisocial behaviors that young children engage in are learned "through specific and alterable processes of socialization and development" (Slaby, Roedell, Arezzo, & Kendrix, 1995, p. 2).

For minority youth, racism and lack of opportunity (as experienced personally or suffered by relatives or friends) may provoke bad conduct. As these youth struggle to develop a racial identity, they may exhibit free-floating aggression, which may be a normal and appropriate response to their circumstances but which nevertheless must be redirected (Prothrow-Stith & Quaday, 1996). Similarly, children living in poverty may express their frustrations through aggression, although their reactions, and those of children of color, may be tempered by a strong, positive ethnic culture and social and economic change (American Psychological Association, APA, 1993).

Early Warning Signs

Some children, but not all, exhibit behavior that predicts violence. Early warning signs include social withdrawal, excessive feelings of isolation and rejection, victimization, poor school attendance

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or performance, artistic expressions of violence, preoccupation with violent media, uncontrolled anger and aggression, substance abuse, and intolerance for people's cultural differences. Past violence, if not remediated through an intervention, is a particularly reliable indicator (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998).

Predictive Value of Risk Factors

Because of the existence of this comprehensive taxonomy of risk factors for children's aggression, some theorists believe it is possible to identify at-risk young children and essential to isolate them for intensive interventions (Walker et al., 1995). Others, citing research demonstrating that the backgrounds of some aggressive children do not include these risk factors, think that screening is a waste of resources; they believe that all children should have an antiviolence education. Moreover, false stereotyping can harm emotionally healthy children and impede the identification of children who are really at risk. For example, it is incorrect to assume that children are necessarily vulnerable because of their race, socioeconomic status, home life, academic ability, or appearance (Dwyer et al., 1998).

Protective Factors

Resilient children may benefit from innate characteristics that prevent them from being aggressive, such as brain chemistry and genes for a temperate personality (Gregg, 1996). They may also live in a home environment that provides care, support, stability, high expectations, and opportunities to build a social network. A positive community environment, which supports families and schools, promotes economic stability, and provides resources for healthy youth development, is also an important protective factor (Kadel, Watkins, Follman, & Hammond, 1995). For children of color, "cultural values can enhance resilience and protect individuals against harsh and stressful life conditions" (APA, 1993, p. 41). Group harmony and family closeness not only deter violent behavior but increase the availability of social support in general and of a caring, personally responsive adult in particular. Finally, a supportive, nonviolent school environment, which enables children to achieve, develop their talents, and be rewarded, is essential to children's resiliency (Kadel et al., 1995).

Types of Children's Bad Conduct

Aggression

Most generally, aggressive children cannot control their impulses; they respond to a feeling without first considering its impact, particularly how their response might affect other people (Greenberg, Kusche, & Mihalic, 1998). While all young children engage in aggressive behavior, such as tantrums, some do not learn alternative prosocial ways of behaving, and their bad conduct intensifies as they age (Slaby et al., 1995).

Aggressive behaviors often characterize children diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) or Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): obstinacy, impulsivity, excessive energy, fighting, negative peer relationships, and a low tolerance for frustration (Flannery, 1997). Angry children may throw heavy objects, use sharp objects as weapons, or spit. Some ways of lashing out harm individuals in the aggressive child's path; the victimization may be an unintended consequence of the action or the result of the child's desire to harm either anyone in the way or a specific person. Generall, because early aggressive behavior strongly predicts greater levels of violence later in life, it is important to intervene as soon as bad conduct is recognized (Flannery & Huff, 1999).

Bullying

Targeting a specific child, usually one perceived to be weak, for a violent or aggressive act is called bullying. Older siblings may bully younger brothers and sisters within the framework of normal family squabbles, but victimizing tactics, such as teasing, taunting, shunning, mugging, and scapegoating a particular child, can be evidence of an antisocial orientation. Girls often express their anger by bullying because it can be personal and direct, seemingly less violent but actually more effective at victimizing another person. Ganging or mobbing, which involves bullying one child by a group of children, is even more serious, and may lead to robberies by groups on the street and later delinquency through gang activity. Frequently, bullies feel powerful when they harm others, and comfortable blaming their victims for provoking the attack. They are likely to be victims of physical punishment at home, and to have been taught that striking back physically is proper retaliation (Banks, 1997).

Hate Bullying

Victimizing a person of a different (and perceived to be inferior) gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation is a specific kind of bullying. It is the result of the perpetrator's need to exercise power over the victim and publicly claim superiority. Depending on the nature of the attack, however, it may not meet the legal definition of a hate crime. Further, such acts are not universally recognized or dealt with as bias incidents because there is a history of tolerating boys' harassment of girls (although such attitudes may change as a result of the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision on this issue), and because certain groups (such as gays and lesbians) are not identified as a protected class in some hate crime legislation. Regardless, a child's act of hate bullying may be a precursor of future bias crimes (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Indeed, fraternity hazing often follows childhood acts of hate (Bodinger-deUriarte & Sancho, 1991).

Violence Prevention: Theories and Applications

Principles and Goals

The most effective antiviolence efforts focus on preventive measures that "eliminate the onset of behavior problems" (Samples & Aber, 1998, p. 228) by helping children feel cared for, secure, and attached to supportive institutions and individuals. Continuity in their lives, particularly through the ongoing presence of significant adults, is essential, and, given the fact that some communities and families cannot offer such support, it is even more necessary for schools to provide it (Noddings, 1996, p. 186). In fact, the most critical factor in promoting children's social development may well be bonding with positive, nurturing adults: teachers who offer unconditional acceptance and support, model prosocial behavior, live according to positive values, and convey the importance of these values to an individual's well-being (Gregg, 1996).

Student-school bonding also deters aggression. It results from children's active, age-appropriate involvement in the educational process; their development and use of behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal skills and competencies; and the reinforcement of their prosocial and academic efforts through teachers' praise and approval (Hawkins et al., 1998).

The most effective school antiviolence programs employ four strategies. The first is **teaching social competence**: specific instruction to help change students from being adversaries in a confrontation to being partners in a search for a fair agreement (Gregg, 1998). Instruction can be consolidated in a separate antiviolence curriculum, or introduced to children as they are learning other curriculum topics, or both. Students are trained to develop the following competencies (Goldstein, 1999; Greenberg et al., 1998; Slaby et al., 1995):

- Understanding and recognizing one's own emotions and the emotions of others.
- Accurate perceptions of a situation to enable correct interpretation of social cues and appropriate responses.
- Understanding and predicting the consequences of personal acts, particularly those involving aggression.

- The ability to remain calm in order to think before acting, to reduce stress and sadness, to replace aggression with positive behavior, and to control anger.
- Social problem-solving, cooperative behavior, understanding and use of group processes, and the development and maintenance of peer relationships.
- Empathy with others in general and, especially, with those perceived as different.
- Peer mediation and conflict resolution.
- Selection of positive role models and supportive mentors.

Specific strategies that the schools and teachers can employ to implement the second strategy, **creating a positive calm, environment**, are discussed below. The third and fourth strategies, not discussed in detail here, are **establishment of behavior standards** and **establishment of rules and regulations for responding to violence**.

Formal and Informal Antiviolence Curricula

Educators differ about how to help children develop prosocial competencies. Some advocate a curriculum that is taught separately from other areas of instruction. A wide variety of well-respected programs do, indeed, help elementary school children manage their impulses, overcome their biases, problem solve, and resolve conflicts nonviolently. For example, BrainPower teaches African American boys to interpret social cues correctly and respond appropriately (Samples & Aber, 1998). Second Step has curricula for each of several grade groups; they cover topics such as impulse control, anger management, appropriate touching, empathy development, and acceptance of people's differences (Gregg, 1998). The Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS) curriculum develops emotional and social competencies and helps reduce aggression (Greenberg et al., 1998).

Other theorists, however, cite evidence that separate prevention programs are not effective. They believe that the overall school environment can promote a prosocial approach to life, and recommend that school personnel model prosocial behaviors throughout the day and teach these competencies across the curriculum (Noddings, 1996). One program embracing this philosophy is PeaceBuilders. Its five principles for children are: (1) praise other people, (2) avoid putdowns, (3) seek wise people as advisors and friends, (4) notice and correct hurts one causes, and (5) right wrongs (Gregg, 1998). Some practitioners even think that a school employing the best of the school reform practices, one focused on educational effectiveness and providing positive support for all aspects of students' life, has a *de facto* effective antiviolence program, since evaluations of such schools do suggest that they are less violent. The Resolving Conflicts Creatively Program takes a hybrid approach; it trains educators to provide students with instruction in peer mediation and bias reduction, and parents to resolve conflicts nonviolently at home (Gregg, 1998).

The school safety movement is also committed to reducing school violence, but not through individual programs. It is based on the belief that a focus on safety gives students a sense of security that calms aggressiveness in at-risk children, alleviates fears that provoke bad behavior, and promotes good behavior by all (Kadel et al., 1995; Samples & Aber, 1998; Stephens, 1998). Schools remain free from violence and crime by establishing positive behavior goals and instituting codes of conduct (with input from students and parents), monitoring the campus for signs of infractions, developing comprehensive plans for dealing with crime and violence (possibly in collaboration with local law enforcement agencies), and responding fairly, swiftly, and consistently when students misbehave.

Strategies Beyond the Curriculum

Many overall approaches to school organization, teaching, and classroom management can promote children's caring and cooperation and minimize their behavior problems. Simply strategies for negotiating the day's activities that enhance the prosocial behavior of all children, they can be employed as part of a schoolwide antiviolence program or curriculum, or be used on an *ad hoc* basis when appropriate. Here is a sampling of such strategies:

Schoolwide

Schools seeking to eliminate students' aggression establish the "norm of nonviolence" (Hawkins et al., 1998, p. 194). They have a calm and predictable atmosphere that provides a sense of security and limits the possibility that unforeseen events will trigger explosive behavior. Schools also specify behavioral expectations; explain the reasons for them; provide structured opportunities to practice good behavior; and foresee and prevent possible bad behavior by, for example, increasing supervision in potentially volatile situations (Walker et al., 1995). As needed, they attempt to counter messages of violence that can be pervasive in children's lives by providing prosocial alternatives to fighting (Hawkins et al., 1998).

Professional development is an important component of a school's antiviolence program, since teachers' attitudes and behavior can promote students' feelings of self-worth and caring for others, and lower their aggression level. Schools ensure that teachers are qualified, foster students' achievement and respond to their needs, have appropriate expectations, are enthusiastic and give frequent praise, and always model prosocial behavior (Greenberg et al., 1998). Finally, schools with adequate facilities and a population consonant with their size are more likely to be nonviolent (Samples & Aber, 1998).

Classroom and Playground

Traditional means of "controlling" a classroom can actually exacerbate children's aggression, provoke a teacher-child argument, or invite bad behavior by children not originally targets of a teacher's control efforts. Alternative ways of maintaining good conduct can be more effective. Teachers can work with students to develop a list of rules for acceptable behavior. They can establish the norm of cooperation and mutual respect and enlist everyone's support to ensure that no students are isolated or bullied either in class or while at play (Banks, 1997).

Teachers can ignore a student who is quietly misbehaving in class (such as not reading along with the others) and approach the student privately later to discuss his or her reasons for refusing to participate. They can respond to an unruly student by recommending alternative, less disruptive behavior instead of showing anger and/or publicly disciplining a student (i.e., suggesting a student raise his hand to get a need met instead of jumping or yelling). Teachers can calm an agitated child by helping him or her solve the precipitating problem and, if the scene is repeated in the future, briefly remind the child how to solve the problem instead of rewarding the bad behavior by again bestowing a lot of attention on the child. In general, it is more effective for teachers to deal with misbehaving children quietly, in private, and with as little attention as possible (Walker et al., 1995).

Providing students with rewards for prosocial behavior in class or at play deters aggression. Teachers can give students points for attendance, preparedness, performance, and good sportsmanship that qualify them for an extra school trip, for example. Parents can be kept apprised of their children's behavior through reports on the number of points being earned over the year (Hawkins et al., 1998).

To foster prosocial behavior while children are at play, teachers can organize cooperative activities instead of winner-loser games. They can urge children to help, rather than taunt, those with less athletic ability. Instead of responding to bad conduct on a playing field with punishment or attention to the perpetrator, either of which can encourage additional negative behavior, they can immediately implement peer mediation strategies with arguing students.

Parent Involvement

Through parenting centers, classes, and private meetings,

schools can help parents promote the prosocial development of their children and recognize and respond to early warning signs. They can help parents understand the effects on their children of their own behavior, and of their nurturing and behavior management strategies. They can support parents emotionally, help them improve their parenting skills, and link them with community services. Educators can also sensitively convey their own concerns about certain children based on observation; they can assure parents that the school will work with them to obtain appropriate interventions and will keep the family's confidentiality (except, of course, in potentially dangerous situations) (Dwyer et al., 1998).

Home-school connections can be facilitated through regular notes to parents that describe violence prevention efforts and suggest how the parents can support them. Homework assignments can help both parents and children explore their feelings about interpersonal violence and figure out alternative strategies for resolving conflicts. To promote role modeling, assignments can prompt parents' discussions about their own behavior when they were the same age as their children (Greenberg et al., 1998).

Educators can involve parents in the school's violence prevention policy by soliciting their input in formulating rules, informing them of conduct policies, and alerting them to possible problems. For example, parents can help their children who are victimized by notifying the school and working with personnel to mediate between the bully and the victim. Parents of bullies can be helped to work with their children to improve their behavior (Banks, 1997).

Despite the value of school antiviolence efforts, the burden of preventing youth violence ultimately rests with parents who are most able to observe and evaluate their children's behavior on an ongoing basis. Thus, a school's most important antiviolence strategy may simply be helping parents understand that ignoring or dismissing a child's small behavior problem nearly always results in the child's subsequent involvement in more serious antisocial actions.

Conclusion

A wide range of strategies to help children develop prosocial attitudes and behaviors is effective. The most successful are those implemented as part of a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach to nurturing children at home, at school, and in the community. The increasing evaluations of existing programs offer useful guides for future program implementation. In addition, there are now organizations providing schools with technical assistance on antiviolence initiatives, such as the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence's Blueprints for Violence Prevention Program (Greenberg et al., 1998).

Public support for school antiviolence initiatives has been limited, however; resources continue to be concentrated on social controls, such as juvenile prosecution and detention. But in addition to making a greater investment in youth violence prevention, society also needs to strengthen communities by supporting parents' efforts to provide emotionally and economically for their children and by reducing violence by controlling access to weapons (Flannery & Huff, 1999). Finally, those elements in society (including the news and entertainment media), which perpetuate the growing culture of violence in the U.S., need to consider whether their message is obviating the benefits of youth violence prevention efforts in the schools.

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